

## **Teaching World Literature: Asia**

Battle Ground Academy

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Battle Ground Academy is an independent, coeducational school located in Franklin, Tennessee (approximately 15 miles south of Nashville). The school serves students in grades kindergarten through the twelfth grade. However, the school is broken into three divisions, each with its own division heads, director of studies, and dean of students. The school has committed in its strategic plan to develop a more diverse student population as well as providing opportunities for cultural exchanges for both our students and student from other countries. The school regularly accepts students from Germany, Mexico, and China. As a part of this developing commitment there has been a strong push to include more Asian studies across the curriculum. Beginning in 2009, the school will offer Mandarin as a language option for students in grades nine through twelve. There are discussions to also include Mandarin in the middle grades as well. The school also has an impressive exchange program with China. Currently there are two Chinese students attending BGA with the intent to graduate and attend an American University. In 2008, BGA graduated its first Chinese student, and she is currently studying at American University in Washington D.C. In March of 2008, two dozen BGA students traveled to China for thirteen days, five days of which our students spent attending a Chinese school and living with a Chinese family.

In an attempt to further educate students about Asian culture and literature, I have completely redesigned the World Literature curriculum so that the Asian cultures are addressed throughout the year. Traditionally, the curriculum covered the ancient writings from the Bible, traditional Greek epics, and then began a survey of the literature of Europe with spatterings of South America and Africa. Given the state of the world today, it is only logical to redesign the curriculum to include the history and literature of cultures that are emerging as world powers today.

Briefly, the curriculum will focus on three areas of the world: the Middle East and Africa, Asia, and the West. Each quarter will cover an expanse of time and roughly 3 weeks

of each quarter will be allotted to teach about each of the three cultures. Obviously, this is a radical change in the curriculum; previously there has been no formal expectation for covering Asian literature and culture. Now, one third of the year will be devoted to Asian culture and literature. The logical approach was to begin with the beginning and work toward the prehistory so that pertinent material can be covered.

The year opens with ancient Middle Eastern cultures and then moves to ancient Asian cultures, and will finish with ancient Western cultures. We will follow a timeline through history comparing and contrasting these three areas of the world finishing with contemporary pieces from the Middle East, Asia, and the West.

Specifically, the Asian portion of the curriculum will include many texts from China and Japan. Most will be excerpts from large works of literature, but there will be the opportunity to read contemporary short stories from several Asian countries as well as a novel about China. In the first quarter I will cover ancient writings; in the second quarter I will cover literature from the Heian period in Japan and the Yuan Dynasty in China. The third quarter will focus on literature from the Muromachi and Tokugawa periods in Japan and the Ming Dynasty in China. Fourth quarter will focus on contemporary literature of Asia, and at this point I will also introduce literature from Korea and Viet Nam as well as some Asian-American authors.

Before we begin studying the literature, we will study the basics of the Asian languages. Students will be introduced to the Wade-Giles and Pin-Yin systems as well as complete exercises in Chinese calligraphy. We will utilize the visiting Chinese exchange students to help us with pronunciation and calligraphy practice. If the schedule allows, I plan to have our students complete a calligraphy project with exchange students on pieces of muslin that can be framed and hung in the classroom along with photographs of the activity. We will then discuss the Japanese syllabaries katakana and hiragana. Students will then be introduced to Kanji and will do a final art project where they will choose a character that best describes them and incorporate that character into a visual presentation such as a painting, collage, Photoshop project, etc. I will utilize the lessons from the Asia for Educators website as well as our Chinese exchange students and an ESL tutor that one family has employed.

Before we begin the ancient literature of Asia, we will study *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse as well as excerpts from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. We will look at how paradox is often used in sacred texts in order to reinforce ideas. We will begin discussing Buddhism and other world religions at this time. We will look at the history, culture, and architecture of Buddhism. Then we will do the same for Confucianism, Daoism, and Shintoism. Students will be asked to explain how each of these religions has contributed to the other. They will also contrast the beliefs of these religions.

Specifically, in the first quarter we will begin with the *Analects* of Confucius. We will begin with a biographical video that introduces Confucius and Confucianism. They will read selections from the *Analects* and will be able to identify Confucian ideas in contemporary thought. Additionally, they will also be able to define, identify, and discuss maxims. Students will also work in small groups to create new maxims specifically related to their experiences at BGA. Next, we will study the *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi. Because the focus of the entire unit is to identify how other cultures have influenced contemporary life, again we will be looking at how the *Tao Te Ching* and Daoism have influenced culture. Since we will have already covered parts of the Bible, students will be reintroduced to the use of paradox. They will write a brief essay comparing the use of paradox in the Bible with the use of paradox in the *Tao Te Ching*. Next we will read poetry from the Tang Dynasty. Poets that will be included are Li Po, Tu Fu, Po Chu-i, and Han-shan. Specifically, students will study these authors' reverence for nature and their ability to provide philosophical insights through these poems. We will also study the methods these poets use to set the mood of their poems. Students will write a lyrical poem in the style of one of the poets we studied. The best of these poems will be submitted together with a proposal from me to publish a grouping in our literary magazine in the spring.

As we move into the second quarter, we will begin with Japanese literature. We will begin with a short in-class reading of the creation story from *Kojiki*. Students will have already read the creation myths from *Genesis* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Their assessment will be a brief essay in which they compare/contrast the three creation stories. Then we will return to lyrical poetry with Tanka as we discuss the similarities and differences of medieval life in the cultures we have already studied. We will study the following poets: Lady Ise, Oshikochi Mitsune, Ki no Tsurayuki, Ono no Komachi, and Saigyō. Because the

curriculum doesn't allow for much poetry, we will also study poetic devices and structure. Again, students will write Tanka poetry in small groups so they can work with form poetry. Next we will read selections from *The Pillow Book*. We will use these selections to practice evaluating style, diction, syntax, and tone. Students will each create a list much like those in *The Pillow Book* with topics such as habits that annoy them, things that look better in the dark, jobs they'd never want to take, etc. These lists will be stylized and published on a classroom blog to incorporate technology and reinforce the practice of personal writing for publishing. Then we will study the background, historical significance, and cultural implications of *The Tale of Genji*. We will review and discuss the elements of a novel as well as the complication that the novel offers as the characters don't have proper names, but are referred to by their roles. Next we will go back to China to study the *Sanzijing* and the *Nuerjing* as classics that sought to teach vital lessons about character and virtue. At this point, we will again look back to our study of the Bible and to our study of Greek and Roman epics and compare/contrast how each of these cultures sought to preserve and instill values in the people of their respective cultures through literature.

From there we will enter into the third quarter study which will begin by studying the Ming Dynasty and the travels of Zheng he. We will look at art and Chinese landscape to better understand this period before we enter the study of *The Peony Pavilion*. We will have already studied Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so we will discuss the similarities of theme and subject matter of these two authors. Again, there will be writing exercises that will reinforce their comparison/contrast skills. Next, we will shift back to Japan and begin the study of *The Tale of the Heike*. Students will do their annual research projects on an aspect of Japanese culture, and we will do an in-depth cultural study of the Samurai warrior. We will then study Haiku by reading the poetry of Basho. Again, we will study poetic devices, theme, mood, and we will write our own Haiku. After students write their Haiku they will be asked to create a multi-media presentation that visually represents the poetry they have written. The last work we will study during the third quarter is the Chinese work, *Journey to the West*. In addition to reading excerpts, students will watch clips of episodes from Chinese television and movies to see how it has been popularized.

We make a giant leap in time to begin the fourth quarter. We will look at contemporary literature from the three major areas we have studied. Then we will look at

Asian-American authors. For this unit, I plan on utilizing the two Chinese students we have at BGA as well as a speaker from the Japanese Consulate's office. We will read stories and/or poems by Ca dao from Viet Nam, Manuel Arguilla from the Philippines, and Kim Namjo from Korea. Students will be asked to choose a short story of their choice by an Asian author to read and write an in-class essay analyzing theme, tone, and style. We will then do an in-depth study of the Cultural Revolution Literature utilizing the lesson plans from Columbia University's East Asian Curriculum Project. We will look at Hao Ran's writings and discuss propaganda and Communism. Students will be discussing Mao Zedong in their history class at this time and the history teacher and I are going to coordinate a multi-disciplinary mini-unit so that students are able to better understand this time in Chinese history.

Then we will look at literature from an Asian-American perspective. For this mini-unit of study we will utilize the anthology, *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian-American Fiction* edited by Jessica Hagedorn. In addition to a selection of stories from this anthology, we will read "The Jay" by Yasunari Kawabata (Japan), "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" by Zhang Jie (China), and the poem "Quang Binh" by Y Nhi (Viet Nam). While reading "The Jay" we will focus on characterization, symbol, and theme. Again, we will discuss why so many Asian writers use nature as a way of making philosophical observations about life. Students will be asked to write a brief essay discussing the use of the jay as a symbol. "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" will be used to teach about flashback as well as addressing the Cultural Revolution. Students will write a blog entry about their views on love, marriage, and/or independence to further practice personal writing for publication. "Quang Binh" will be used to illustrate how poets develop setting and theme. We will also discuss the theme of progress. The students' final creative writing project will be to write a poem that reflects on a strong childhood memory or their childhood home.

We will finish our study of Asian literature by reading the novel, *The Good Earth*, by Pearl Buck. Again, I will utilize the lessons from the East Asian Curriculum Project from Columbia University as a springboard for this final mini-unit. We will use this novel to again discuss the elements of a novel, the importance of plot design, character development, and tone.

Again, the Asian portion of this course represents approximately one third of the curriculum; students will have roughly 60 instructional hours spent solely on Asian literature, where before they had significantly less. Much of the students' time will be utilized to not only understand the individual customs, cultures, and literature of Asian countries, but they will also be asked to discuss how these customs, cultures, and pieces of literature have influenced and/or been influenced by other cultures.

My ultimate hope in redesigning the curriculum is that students will see for themselves at the end of the year that people are really not very different. Our customs, beliefs, and activities share more similarities than differences. I also hope to inspire a desire to travel and experience world cultures. Our students have the resources to travel and experience other cultures, but many of them are not interested in doing so. My hope is that the education will fan the desire so that the students will take advantage of amazing travel opportunities and learning experiences.

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